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THIS WEEK'S NEWS

BLEAK PROSPECTS THIS YEAR FOR DVD AUDIO SPECIFICATIONS

Is next-generation DVD audio format an urgent cure for which there currently is no disease? Few we polled disagreed with contention recently by senior Sony official in Japan that prospects are bleak for consensus on specifications for new DVD audio carrier. Preponderance of remaining work before DVD alliance working group on audio specs makes it doubtful that standards can be agreed on this year, Teruaki Aoki, pres. of Sony Computer Peripherals & Components, told visiting U.S. reporters recently. Given continued success of CD in many world markets, recording industry doesn't see urgent need for new audio carrier, Aoki said. Prerequisite for commercialization of new DVD audio carrier is preparation of new base of audio source material of better quality than today's masters, he said. Aoki is "accurate" that there are "issues important to the recording industry—that haven't been resolved yet," RIAA Pres. Hilary Rosen told us. "The most important thing about designing any new format is that it be the right format for consumers and our industry," she said. She told NARM convention last week in Orlando that "we have a product in the marketplace, the CD, that has widespread consumer satisfaction. The record industry's key intention as we move into DVD audio is not to shake consumer confidence in their current investment." Rosen said recording industry is working with DVD alliance to develop hybrid dual-layer disc capable of storing Red Book audio on one layer, high-density DVD audio on other. Missing from existing CD format is multichannel sound, inclusion of which in DVD video specs is "going to change the consumer's listening experience," Rosen told NARM. Multichannel for DVD audio is area that creative community probably "is spending the most time on," she said. "Manufacturers are working cooperatively on the issue of copyright protection," Rosen said, "but there's not a solution there yet." Voluntary industry technical standards need to be in place before DVD audio can be introduced, she said: "If there's one thing we learned with Enhanced CD, no matter how great your product is, no matter how much value added for the consumer there is, if there is not a technical standard that people can voluntarily adhere to... the product will fail. And we don't want the next product to fail." Bottom line, she said, is that although industries are "moving in the right path" toward standardizing next-generation audio carrier,

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"it's going to take a while." She predicted DVD audio products could become available "somewhere within a 2-year window." Of various DVD audio proposals on table, Rosen told us before NARM show that recording industry views 96-KHz 24-bit plan promoted by Pioneer (and contained as subset to current DVD video specs) as "unacceptable." Nevertheless, Nimbus used NARM convention to promote its belief that DVD audio specs "may closely mimic" audio provisions in DVD video specs. Recording industry remains "open-minded" on all proposals regardless of sampling frequencies and word lengths, pending private listening tests still to be conducted before DVD alliance, RIAA Senior Vp-Technology David Stebbings said. Nevertheless, Pioneer and its allies will need to demonstrate "transparent" ways of sample-rate converting to 44.1 kHz of Red Book audio standard from 96 kHz in Pioneer proposal without degrading sound quality, as some observers have argued, he said. British-based Acoustic Renaissance for Audio (ARA), which supports many aspects of Pioneer proposal, "fully understood the implications" of down-converting "when we proposed 96 kHz," said group's dir., Robert Stuart, Meridian Audio. "It is quite unrealistic to expect the DVD to operate other than at multiples of 48 kHz," he told us. To do so, he said, would "at minimum" rule out storage of pictures on DVD audio format -- "which I have already said I would not favor." Ironically, Stuart said, "there's some foundation" to argument that down-converting from 96 kHz to 44.1 kHz degrades sound quality -- "but only some and only now." He said: "Meridian has a fair bit of expertise in signal processing and in mastering processors." As result, he said, company believes that "in a well-designed system, capturing and editing at 96 kHz and then down-converting to 44.1 kHz could give a better overall than doing it all at 44.1." He said sample-rate converters "are still evolving." As result, he said, "what today may feel impossible will be straightforward soon enough." Therefore, he said, "this is not an argument with which to prevent progress." Although virtually every major replication plant is believed to have tested mass production of dual-layer DVDs and mainstream pricing, technological hurdles abound in trying to adapt dual-layer DVD for hybrid DVD audio applications, as requested in recording industry wish list for next-generation audio carrier. Replication industry sources we canvassed said it's at least same technological jump from dual-layer to hybrid DVD audio disc as going from single-layer to dual-layer medium, and latter still hasn't been perfected. Key challenge in mass-producing hybrid disc is fashioning semireflective layer that's also wavelength-sensitive to permit same laser pickup to read Red Book layer and high-density audio layer. Philips late last month told reporters in Eindhoven that it now is developing dual-layer DVD audio hybrid discs that comply with recording industry's recommended technical requirements. First samples of hybrid discs will be ready in April, Philips said. However, spokeswoman told us Philips plans first public demonstrations at June news briefings planned as preview for

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late-summer Internationale Funkausstellung trade fair in Berlin.

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